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# MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES

VOLUME XXXVI

MAY, 1921

NUMBER 5

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## “C’EST NOUS QUI SOMMES LES ANCIENS”<sup>1</sup>

Descartes<sup>2</sup> used the striking paradox of applying the term of ancients to the moderns and of calling those who lived earlier younger than those who are their descendants. To this conception Fontenelle<sup>3</sup> and Perrault<sup>4</sup> added the figure of comparing humanity to a single individual whose mind becomes more mature as time goes on, more capable, and more intelligent. It is the purpose of this study to outline briefly the sources and development of this notion of human progress as it is expressed by Fontenelle. The idea was to be encountered on every side among scholars. For this reason no single source could be assigned to Fontenelle’s conception; and yet some of its elements may have come to him from Pascal.

Even in Biblical times the idea of progress seems to have existed<sup>5</sup> and although the Bible expresses rather an ancient belief in the decadence of the world, yet there is to be found in the scriptures some evidence of the opposite idea of progress. Although the domi-

<sup>1</sup> This study was undertaken at the suggestion of Professor E. P. Dargan of the University of Chicago. The author is indebted to him for much valuable criticism.

<sup>2</sup> See note 23 below.

<sup>3</sup> *Digression sur les Anciens et les Modernes, Œuvres*, iv. Edition of Libraires associés, Paris, 1764.

<sup>4</sup> *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes*. Cf. Hippolyte Rigault, *Histoire de la querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*. Paris, 1856, 179 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. Delvaille, *Essai sur l’histoire de l’idée de progrès jusqu’à la fin du XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, 1911, Book I.

nant note among Classical writers is one of regret for the better days of the Golden Age or of complaint at the degeneracy of the present, yet Lucretius' fifth book of the *De rerum naturae* contains a remarkable description of the development and progress of the human intelligence and Cicero,<sup>6</sup> Seneca,<sup>7</sup> and Ovid<sup>8</sup> all gave some expression to the idea of progress. Saint Augustine also stated his belief in human advancement.<sup>9</sup> In the Middle Ages, when there was an all-pervading sense of the authority of the ancients, both Christian and pagan, there may be found expressions of the belief that the present age is more advanced than any previous era because of the accumulation of experience and knowledge by which the living may profit to carry on the development of human intelligence.<sup>10</sup> In the period of the Renaissance the same notion is held by Henri Estienne,<sup>11</sup> Bernard Pallissy,<sup>12</sup> Joachim du Bellay,<sup>13</sup> and Ronsard.<sup>14</sup>

In 1620 Francis Bacon published his *Novum Organum*, in which is to be found a complete statement of the Moderns' point of view. It is perhaps to him in large part that Pascal and the Cartesian philosophers, and later, though indirectly, Fontenelle and Perrault owed their ideas in regard to human progress.<sup>15</sup> Bacon writes as follows:

"The opinion which men cherish of antiquity is altogether idle, and scarcely accords with the term. For the old age and increasing years of

<sup>6</sup> *De finibus*, I, 1-4.

<sup>7</sup> 90th *Epistle* and *Natural Questions*, VII.

<sup>8</sup> *Ars amatoria*, III, 121 ff.

<sup>9</sup> *Civitas Dei*, x, 14; *De diversis quaestionibus*, I, lxxxiii, 58; *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, I, 23.

<sup>10</sup> See John of Salisbury, *Metaphysicus*, III, 4, Migne, *Pat. lat.*, cxcix, 900; Peter of Blois, *Pat. lat.*, ccvii, 290; Chrestien de Troyes, *Cligés*, ed. Wendelin Foerster, Halle, 1884, 30-39; Henri d'Andeli, *La Bataille des VII arts*, pub. by Jubinal in 1875 in his edition of the works of Rustebeuf vol. III, Additions); Roger Bacon, *Opus majus*, ed. by J. H. Bridges, 3 vol. Oxford, 1897-1900, I, 6, 13 ff.

<sup>11</sup> *Apologie pour Hérodote*, ed. Ristelhuber, 1879, II, xxvii, 118.

<sup>12</sup> *Œuvres*, I: *Au lecteur*, 8 ed. France, Paris, 1880.

<sup>13</sup> *Défense*, etc., ed. Chamard, 1904, 115, 116, 118, 131, 133.

<sup>14</sup> *Art poétique*, ed. Blanchemain, VII, 336.

<sup>15</sup> Professor George Sherburn calls my attention to a study of Bacon's influence on theories of progress in England by R. F. Jones entitled *The Background of the "Battle of the Books," Washington University Studies*, VII, Humanistic Series, No. 2 (1920), 97-162.

the world should in reality be considered as antiquity, and this is rather the character of our own times than of the less advanced age of the world in those of the ancients; for the latter, with respect to ourselves, are ancient and elder, with respect to the world modern and younger. And as we expect a greater knowledge of human affairs, and more mature judgment from an old man than from a youth, on account of his experience, and the variety and number of things he has seen, heard and meditated upon, so we have reason to expect much greater things of our own age (if it knew but its strength and would essay to exert it) than from antiquity, since the world has grown older and its stock has been increased and accumulated with an infinite number of experiments and observations. . . . Reverence for antiquity has been a retarding force in science.”<sup>16</sup>

Joseph Texte states<sup>17</sup> that almost all of Bacon had penetrated into France before 1700. Probably his works were known to a number of scholars and writers in the seventeenth century. His essays were translated by Jean Baudoin in 1611. Texte refers to the list of translations given by Charles Adam (*Philosophie de Francis Bacon*), adding to that list the translation by le sieur Golofer in 1632 of the *De augmentis scientiarum*. Lanson (*Manuel bibliographique*) lists four translations of Bacon in the seventeenth century (two of the *Novum Organum*: No. 4042-45). Pierre Bayle, in the *Dictionnaire*, says that Bacon was “un des plus grands Esprits de son siècle”; adding: “Le public reçut favorablement ses Ouvrages. Le *Traité de Augmentis Scientiarum* . . . fut rimprimé à Paris l’an 1624.” Bayle refers to Baillet’s *Vie de Descartes* (1690), vol. I, and to Gassendi, *Opera* (1658), I, 62 where Gassendi analyses the famous *Organum*. Bayle cites a letter from Costar to Voiture: “J’ai lu depuis quelques mois le livre que le chancelier Bacon a fait du Progrès des sciences où j’ai trouvé beaucoup de choses admirables” (*Entretiens de Voiture et de Costar*, ed. Paris, 1654, 173). It was, says Bayle, one of the books that Costar used most. Voiture replied to this letter of Costar: “J’ai trouvé parfaitement beau tout ce que vous me mandez de Bacon” (*Œuvres*, II, 109). Sorel, whose *Science universelle* was published in 1647 and his *Perfection de l’homme* in 1655, was, according to Gillot,<sup>18</sup> a disciple of Bacon. Bacon’s *Logic* was

<sup>16</sup> Edition of Joseph Dewey, 1904, I, 84.

<sup>17</sup> *Jean Jacques Rousseau et les origines du cosmopolitisme littéraire en France*, Paris, 1895, 8.

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, 296.

reviewed in the *Journal des Savans* on the eighth of March, 1666, and in the *Nouvelles de la République des lettres* in June, 1684.

In the passage cited from Bacon occurs the comparison of the life of the world to that of a single man. This figure was not original, however, with Francis Bacon. According to H. O. Taylor,<sup>19</sup> the metaphor is to be found in more than one of the Latin classics and in patristic and mediaeval writers. The latter took it from St. Paul (*Romans*, XII, 415), who speaks of many members in one body, one body in Christ. The likeness of the human body to the body politic or ecclesiastic was carried out in every imaginable detail and used acutely or absurdly by politicians and schoolmen from the eleventh century onward. The earliest use of the simile in terms similar to those of Bacon is probably to be found in Saint Augustine's *City of God* (x, 14): "The education of the human race, represented by the people of God, has advanced, like that of an individual, through certain epochs, or, as it were, ages, so that it might gradually rise from earthly to heavenly things."

Returning to the seventeenth century, we can mention at least seven authors in France who used this figure before Fontenelle. Early in January, 1636, Guillaume Colletet outlined in his discourse, *Pour estre éloquent, il faut imiter les Anciens, et qu'en les imitant on les peut surpasser*, the theory of human perfectibility and expressed Bacon's comparison clearly.<sup>20</sup> In the same year, in his *Préface des Nouvelles Conjectures sur la digestion*, published at Paris,<sup>21</sup> Cureau de la Chambre wrote: "Nous sommes dans la vieillesse du Monde et de la Philosophie; ce que l'on appelle Antiquité en a esté l'Enfance et la Jeunesse." Blaise Pascal used the same figure in his *Préface sur le Traité du vide*, probably written between 1647 and 1651.<sup>22</sup> We find Bacon's ideal expressed again

<sup>19</sup> *The Mediaeval Mind*, 2 vols., London<sup>2</sup>, 1914, I, 86.

<sup>20</sup> See A. Michiels, *Histoire des idées littéraires au XIXe siècle*, 1863, 2 vol., Paris, I, 41 ff. Michiels states (p. 54) that Arnauld, Nicole, Terrasson, and all the Cartesians proclaimed human perfectibility.

<sup>21</sup> Cited by Adam, *Etudes sur les principaux philosophes*, Paris, 1903, 218 and by Brunschvicg et Boutroux, *Œuvres de Blaise Pascal*, Paris, 1908, II, 141, note.

<sup>22</sup> Leon Brunschvicg et Pierre Boutroux, *Blaise Pascal: Œuvres* II, 129 ff.: XVIII Fragment de Préface etc., date présumée Octobre, Novembre 1647. Premier recueil Guerrier XXX apud Faugère, *Pensées, Fragments, et Lettres*, 1844, I, 91. The preface was not published until 1779, when it appeared in Bossuet's *Pascal: Œuvres* under the title of *De l'autorité en matière de philosophie*.

in a fragment of a manuscript of Descartes cited by his biographer Baillet: <sup>23</sup> Cartesian scholars in general, according to Gillot, <sup>24</sup> who bases his statement on Jacques Rohault, *Traité de Physique*, 1671, considered antiquity as the youth of time. Malebranche wrote in similar terms: <sup>25</sup> “La raison veut, . . . que nous les (Aristotle and Plato) jugions plus ignorants que les nouveaux philosophes, puisque, dans le temps où nous vivons, le monde est plus vieux de deux mille ans, et qu’il a plus d’expérience.” La Mothe Le Vayer (1583-1672): <sup>26</sup> “les autres soutiennent que les anciens ayant été dans la jeunesse du monde, s’il y en a, c’est ceux qui vivent aujourd’hui, lesquels sont véritablement les anciens, et qui doivent, par conséquent, être les plus considérables.” As early as 1683, in the *Dialogues des Morts*, Fontenelle had allied himself with the Moderns. He very cleverly allows Socrates to persuade Montaigne that Nature has remained constant and creates as fine men as ever. <sup>27</sup> Hervé explains to Erasistratus the modern discoveries in regard to the circulation of the blood. It is in the *Digression sur les Anciens et les Modernes*, however, that Fontenelle really throws himself into the conflict. <sup>28</sup> His manner of treating the subject there is very similar to that of Pascal. So much so that Havet was led to ask <sup>29</sup> whether Fontenelle had seen the unpublished manuscript of the *Fragment d’une préface du traité sur le vide*. It has been generally agreed, however, that Fontenelle did not know Pascal’s work but that he got his ideas from the Cartesian philosophers. <sup>30</sup>

The present writer, on the contrary, would answer Havet’s question in the affirmative. Fontenelle’s comparisons are so strikingly like those of Pascal that it seems necessary to assume that Fontenelle saw either the manuscript or a copy of the manuscript of the *Fragment d’une préface du traité sur le vide*.

<sup>23</sup> Baillet, *Vie de Descartes*, Paris, 1690, VIII, 10. Cited by Hippolyte Rigault, *La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, Paris, 1856, 51.

<sup>24</sup> *Op. cit.*, 391.

<sup>25</sup> *Recherche de la Vérité*, ed. Francisque Bouillier, 1880, II, 2, 5, 251.

<sup>26</sup> *Quatre dialogues faits à l’imitation des anciens, par Oratius Tubero*, 2 vols., Francfort, 1506 (false date), II, 218. Cited by Rigault, *op. cit.*, 51.

<sup>27</sup> *Œuvres* I, Dialogue III, 43. Edition of Libraires associés, Paris, 1764.

<sup>28</sup> *Œuvres* IV.

<sup>29</sup> Ernest Havet, *Pensées de Pascal*<sup>2</sup>, 1866, 266, note 1.

<sup>30</sup> See Rigault, *op. cit.*, 53, note 2; Brunshvicg et Boutroux, *op. cit.*, II, 140, note; Delvaille, *op. cit.*, 224.

Upon analyzing the passages of the *Digression* and the *Fragment d'une préface* that present textual similarities there is to be found an identity in six different elements as follows: (1) the comparison of all humanity to a single man; (2) the division of the life of humanity into different ages as we are accustomed to divide an individual's life into the ages of youth and maturity; (3) the idea that the ancients were beginners and subject to the errors of the beginners; (4) the comparison of men to animals; (5) the ironical allusion to the crime of presuming to surpass the ancients; and (6) the idea of the debt of the moderns toward the ancients who have raised them to a certain height already.

*Fragment*, 139: "toute la suite des hommes, pendant le cours de tant de siècles, doit estre considérée comme un mesme homme qui subsiste toujours et qui apprend continuellement."

P. 141: "cet homme universel . . . ."

*Digression*, 189: "Un bon esprit cultivé est, pour ainsi dire composé de tous les esprits des siècles précédens; ce n'est qu'un même esprit qui s'est cultivé pendant tout ce temps là. Ainsi cet homme qui a vécu depuis le commencement du monde. . . ."

Pascal (139) divides the life of man as a whole into its youth and its old age, placing the ancients in the infancy of humanity. Fontenelle (189) speaks of the infancy, youth, and age of virility of humanity considered as a single individual but maintains that there will never be any old age.

Pascal (141) and Fontenelle (177) both consider the ancients as beginners who made many mistakes. Pascal enumerates several mistakes that they made in the realm of science. Fontenelle states in general terms that the ancients have committed most of the errors that needed to be made before it was possible to attain scientific truth.

*Fragment*, 137: "N'est-ce pas là traiter indignement la raison de l'homme, et la mettre en parallèle avec l'instinct des animaux!"

*Digression*, 178: "Pour ne faire que les éгалer, il faudroit que nous fussions d'une nature fort inférieure à la leur; il faudroit que nous ne fussions pas hommes aussi bien qu'eux."

*Fragment*, 137: "On faict un crime de les contredire et un attentat d'y adjouster,"

*Digression*, 197: "Il faut que ce soit un crime qui ne puisse être pardonné."

*Fragment*, 136: " les premières cognossances qu'ils nous ont données ont servy de degrés aux nostres, et . . . dans ces avantages nous leur sommes redevables de l'ascendant que nous avons sur eux; . . . Notre veue a plus d'estendue . . . et nous voyons plus qu'eux."

*Digression*, 177: " On a déjà l'esprit éclairé par ces mêmes découvertes que l'on a devant les yeux; nous avons des vues empruntées d'autrui qui s'ajoutent à celle que nous avons de nostre fonds; et si nous surpassions le premier inventeur, c'est lui qui nous a aidés à le surpasser."

The probability that Fontenelle knew Pascal's unpublished manuscript is increased by another striking parallel to be found between a passage in the same fragment of Pascal and one in Fontenelle's essay *Sur la poésie en général* where the instinct of beasts is compared to the intelligence of man and in both cases the work of the bee in constructing its hives is taken as the example of animal instinct working with great skill but with the same ability each time whereas man is able to develop his powers of artistic construction by intelligence and experience.<sup>31</sup>

The possibility that Fontenelle could have seen the manuscript of Pascal's *Fragment d'une préface* is far from remote. The papers left by Pascal were seen and studied by Arnauld, Nicole,<sup>32</sup> de Roannez,<sup>33</sup> Leibnitz,<sup>34</sup> and others. Malebranche,<sup>35</sup> who was a friend of both Leibnitz and Fontenelle, may have been the intermediary through whom the latter became acquainted with Pascal's work. Fontenelle was, as is well known, the purveyor of ideas from one set of scientists to another. In his *Préface de l'Histoire de L'Académie des Sciences* he tells us of the groups of scholars who were drawn together by the need of communicating their ideas to one another.

With all this intercourse among a small body of scientists, and with the tendency to communicate by writing as well any new ideas that came to them, it is probable that Pascal's *Préface* was known in manuscript form to some of the scholars of the time. There is no reason to doubt the possibility that Fontenelle could have gained

<sup>31</sup> *Fragment*, 138 and *Sur la poésie etc.* (*Œuvres*, VIII, 310); cf. Delvaille, *op. cit.*, 215, n. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Prosper Faugère, *Pensées, Fragments et lettres de Blaise Pascal*, Paris, 1844, I, XIV.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, XIII; cf. also xv and n. 4.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Nourrisson, *la Philosophie de Leibnitz*, Paris, 1860, p. 70.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20 ff. and A. Laborde-Milaa, *Fontenelle*, Paris, 1905, p. 24.



possession of the contents of this work of Pascal; and it seems probable from the evidence of the texts that Pascal's *Fragment d'une Préface* was known to the author of the *Digression sur les Anciens et les Modernes*.

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## EN GLANANT CHEZ LA FONTAINE <sup>1</sup>

Sainte-Beuve déclara déjà en 1829 que revenir sur La Fontaine après Chamfort, La Harpe et Walkenaër, c'est se condamner à ne rien dire de bien nouveau pour le fond. Le grand critique a su réfuter lui-même ces paroles, puisque l'étude où elles se trouvent, savait frayer un chemin nouveau en révélant la nature de la fable lafontainienne. Néanmoins nous avons aujourd'hui toutes les raisons possibles d'y souscrire. Car depuis, à partir de l'an 1860, la gloire du poète est renée à une vie nouvelle et plus brillante qu'auparavant. C'est vers ce temps qu'ont paru coup sur coup le chapitre de Nisard, chef-d'œuvre d'éloge mondain,—puis le cours de Vinet fait autrefois à l'université de Lausanne et désignant au *penseur* la place qu'on lui accordera de nos jours,—et surtout la thèse remaniée de Taine, alors jeune, mais déjà artiste accompli en fait d'analyses puissantes et hardies, fougueux constructeur de systèmes, doué d'une force de logique impérieuse et d'une imagination non moins débordante et arbitraire que celle des grands illustrateurs de La Fontaine, Grandville, Doré ou Moreau; finalement les deux tomes de Saint-Marc-Girardin, cours fait à la Sorbonne, s'occupant surtout du moraliste et cherchant à encadrer le fabuliste dans l'histoire du genre. Ils furent suivis en 1885 par Faguet, qui a donné outre un volume ingénieux servant d'introduction pour la jeunesse, une étude exquise sur le causeur, le poète et l'artiste. En 1895,

<sup>1</sup> Sous ce titre modeste M. Jules Haraszti, professeur à l'université de Budapest, connu pour ses travaux sur la littérature française (*Schelandre, Chénier, Rostand* etc.) désire publier un volume d'études sur La Fontaine à l'occasion du centenaire. L'ouvrage contient les chapitres suivants: *In Memoriam* (le volume est dédié à la mémoire du fils de l'auteur). *Introduction. Principes d'art d'un classique irrégulier. Procédés d'art d'un poète causeur. Un Rousseau avant la lettre. Le poète lyrique. L'artiste psychologue. L'artiste peintre. Conclusions*. On publie ici une partie de l'*Introduction* et quelques pages tirées des *Conclusions*.